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SUBJECT: WORRY AT STATE HOUSE OVER POSSIBLE MULUZI RETURN

1.(SBU) In what comes across as an act of desperation, the State House press office is circulating a document denouncing former President Bakili Muluzi's "involvement in terrorist activities," and calling on him to stay out of the 2009 presidential race. The press release alleges, without providing any direct evidence, that Muluzi sent funds for military supplies and equipment to former Sudan People's Liberation Army leader John Garang in 1994.

12. (SBU) The release, which was referred to but not quoted due to "lack of evidence" in the Malawian press on February 7, decries Muluzi's "flouting" of Malawian policy of non-interference in civil wars. "In light of Mr. Muluzi's fractious, querulous and warlike conduct he should not be allowed to stand for the third term since he is likely to spoil the foundation of peace and security that the African Union and all noble international bodies have set up."

13. (SBU) This incident comes after recent public speculation over whether Muluzi will run for President again in 2009. The Malawian constitution bars any president from more than two consecutive terms, but presumably Muluzi would constitutionally be eligible to run for a non-consecutive third term. However, there is currently a debate under way within the UDF over this question; several of Muluzi's juniors (former Finance Minister Friday Jumbe, UDF spokesman Sam Mpasu, and MP for Likoma George nga Mtafu among them) are jockeying for the nomination. Muluzi himself, who is in the U.K. at the moment, has been silent on the matter.

14. (SBU) Comment: We should note, for context, that the Malawi campaign for the presidency in 2009 is in full swing. What we are seeing in full force is forceful jockeying for position with 2009 in mind, among a very few members of the political elite here. It has been reported that the Malawi Congress Party has already decided that longtime strongman John Tembo will stand for the MCP. The current controversy over fired Agriculture Minister Uladi Mussa's new "Malawi" party is part of that debate, as is the ongoing maneuvering within the UDF, and disputes within the northern regional parties over leadership. There is no question within the President's DPP who will be their nominee.

15. (SBU) The unfortunate State House press release is a crudely-executed smear that reflects President Mutharika's concern about Muluzi and his possible return to politics. It's difficult to see what relevance Muluzi's alleged support for a war over twelve years ago would have today, even if there was hard evidence presented, aside from the release's potential damage to current relations with Sudan. The fact that even the Malawian press, which is often criticized for its lack of professionalism, is refusing to run with the story says a great deal. If this is the worst thing the government can say about Muluzi, in light of the other things they could have said about his regime's rampant corruption, perhaps he has little to fear on the mudslinging side should he actually enter the presidential race. End Comment.

EASTHAM